

TODO, revista de Mexico, Num. 1036, ____o 16 de 1953, has a pretty devastating cover cartoon. A Texas rancher, in cowboy boots and Stetson, is standing on one side of a river, with a handful of greenbacks. A horde of little men, labeled "braceros mexicanos", is rushing for them, with the tongues drooling, etc. But the rancher has a horsewhip hidden behind his back. In the background, grinning as he surveys the scene, is a caricature of someone -- no doubt a Mexican political figure -- whom I do not recognize.

Letter from E.L. Keenan, Deputy Director, USES, Bureau of Employment Security, usdl, states that "approximately 8% of the total number of Mexican workers imported have not fulfilled their contracts. This does not mean that this many workers are in the country illegally but we do not have a record showing that all of the have returned to Mexico." June 15, 1953

The Nation. The Wetbacks, Gladwin Hill. August 22, 1953

From notes in Texas AFL files, not used in published reports ;

"(The recruiting station) at Monterrey was closed some months ago, presumably because too many Mexican politicians were enriching themselves, through the edium of a well-developed system of "mordida," at the expense of the aspiring braceros....

"Originally, each Compliance Officer was assigned a district which coincided with that of the regional Mexican Council. Under the present system, as an economy measure, the districts have been greatly enlarged ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ presented....

"(Originally) the granting of certification and the placing of the order for braceros (was channeled) through USES... In recent months, however, this system has changed considerably. The State Employment agencies are now given wider authority, including the certification of labor shortages, and can issue a certification without channeling the application through (the USES)... (Result is that compliance officer does not enter the picture until late in the game, if at all, and has a difficult time maintaining a file of how many braceros are where, when their contracts are due to expire, etc. HPA)

"In the Eagle Pass area, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the bracero is expected to bathe in the irrigation canal, draw his drinking water from the same canal, and make his toilet wherever there is a clump of brush. In a considerable number of farms visited this was the standard procedure... No effort seems to have been made in (the Eagle Pass) area, primarily, to supply housing for the braceros. They are encouraged by the employers to move their families up from the interior of Mexico and commute backwards and forwards to the Mexican side of the border, daily. Some farmers were reported as preferring to drive their braceros a distance of fifty miles daily, rather than go to the expense of supplying housing, bedding, blankets and cooking utensils as the International agreement requires.

"In Piedras Negras, immediately across the Rio Grande river from Eagle Pass, an estimated 10,000 increase in regional population is reported since the start of the bracero program... (Other border town increases, 1940 to 1950, shown as percent of 1940 figure:

Mexicali, 240%
Tijuana, 259%
Ciudad Juarez, 149%
Matamoros, 179%)

"...the maximum time a bracero may spend in the United States is 18 months, and according to General Calderon, chief of the Mexican section of the program, the bracero must return to Mexico and reside there a year before becoming eligible again ~~for~~... It does not seem reasonable that the bracero...who has gone to the expense of moving his family to (the border) will, at the termination of his contract, return to the interior with his family at considerable more expense. On the contrary, during a number of interviews, it was learned that the braceros had no intention of returning to Mexico at the expiration of their contract, but planned to return to the United States as wetbacks. They had become familiar with customs, the terrain, and knew where the demand existed for agricultural laborers. A number of wetbacks interviewed in the same area admitted that they had been in the United States at an earlier date as braceros, but because they had moved their families to the border...had to return to the United States as wetbacks to maintain their families.

"When this situation was explained to the Eagle Pass Compliance Officer, he stated that he was aware of the situation, but that it was not within his power or authority to do anything about it. The question of braceros commuting daily across the river, according to him, was out of his jurisdiction, and there was nothing in the International Agreement to stop such a practice....

"Braceros in the same area and in Starr County stated that their employers were encouraging them to take an extended leave of absence in Mexico, during a seasonal lull, and that they ~~did~~ need not check out through the Contracting Station... It can be assumed that the employer wanted to be rid of them with the least bother, and not have to haul the braceros and their belongings to the Contracting Stations. Two braceros working in Starr

County who had been encouraged to head south without checking out, stated that the reason for this was probably because their employer had been working a wetback labor force three times as large as his bracero force, and that all of them had slept in the same dormitory. The two braceros felt they had been discouraged from going to the Contreras Station in fear that they might complain about the presence of the wetbacks on the same farm...

"..in the Laredo area .. a number of farmers~~sxxxkxxx~~ who have utilized both wetbacks and braceros, have finally turned to local domestic labor which they report is far more satisfactory. The USES Complience Officers in these..areas where such a trend is developing encourage wherever possible the use of domestics, and take a "realistic" view on the matter of blacklisting. As one remarked in Brownsville during the field survey, "O.K., so we blacklist all the farmers in the area. Do you think, with the dry river as it is now that blacklising will stop them from getting labor?" They'll turn stronger tha ever to the wetback labor market, so we figure we're further ahead being lenient, selling them on the brogram, and if domestics are available, to use domestics."

In 1946, approximately 100,000 wetbacks were apprehended by the Border Patrol. In 1947, the year the bracero program was abandoned, the number increased to approximately 200,000. It stayed at this level in 1948. In 1949, Mexico devalued its peso. The number of wetbacks increased to nearly 300,000. And kept right on going up. 1950, 480,000; 1951, 514,000; 1952, 544,000; 1953, 875,000. Bingo. (~~88,000~~ ~~89~~ 89,000 in August, 1953, alone.)

From speech b John Holland, District Director, USINS (San Antonio):
In 1942, Border patrol in LRGV apprehended fewer than 1,000 Wetbacks. In 1953, 333,000.
"For many years the wetback was taken more or less for granted with the understanding that he was just a poor Mexican national who came across the border to work a few weeks on a farm or ranch and, after making a few dollars, return to Mexico. A number of years ago he was not a serious problem-- but in recent years the picture has changed...
"In the entire Valley we have about 150 Border Patrolmen. This sounds like a good many. But we have 25 each at Kingsville and Falfurrias (checking highways and railroads). This leaves us a hundred men to cover 350 miles of river front -- which for the past few years has been so dry that it is no problem to cross. Since the wetbacks are on the move 24 hours a day, our officers must be on the job at all times. Thus we have to spread our men out pretty thinly and if we attempted to hold the line on the rio Grande we could have a team of two men every thirty-five miles...

"In many instances (our men) question persons who are actually citizens of the United States... Some are resentful of such action on the part of our officers and complain about it. Oddly, however, most of the complaints..come from employers -- usually those who are known to habitually hire wetbacks.

"There are hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of false birth and baptismal certificates in possession of persons in this area... (quite recently one of our officers in Mexico City, through the cooperation of Mexican officials, learned that certain individuals in Mexico were obtaining numerous false birth certificates for Mexican nationals who had never set foot in the United States. These were being issued wholesale by state authorities in Indiana...

"The late J. Luz Saenz of McAllen, reverently referred to as "El Professor" wrote t'is to a Valley newspaper... 'What do you think has been the cause for Valley native residents going north and west, for as much as nine months, with families? Is it due to their 'gypsy instinct,' vacation touring, or because they like to say they earn more there than down here? Do you think they could support and dress decently a large family with a wetback wage? If you are in doubt try it and see if you can compete with it. Do 't tell me the Spanish-speaking people are to blame for it because of the large families they raise. From these large families came many of the soldiers who have stood the brunt of wars that have defended the country and the wealth of those families who had two or one or no children at all.' ...

"Many employers who don't show any interest regarding the welfare of our own citizens, quite openly state they hire wetbacks 'because they feel sorry for them' and besides, if they pay them a dollar a day, that is more than they ever earned in Mexico. These employers usually yell the loudest when we pick up their wetbacks and they do everything they can to harm us. ~~xxxx~~ I'll say one thing -- we are doing our utmost to enlarge their horizons to the extent that they will have to hire citizens -- or else. We are not interested in the living standards or wages in Mexico. This is the United States where we operate and we are trying to maintain American standards -- and I don't expect to compromise on anything less...

"...we..need..the assistance of some law which will make it a penalty to hire wetbacks. As you know, an attempt was made about two years ago to have such a law passed b Congress. This stirred up quite a storm in Washington. Many opponents, principally from the Valley, stated that such a law would result in American citizens of Latin descent not being able to get jobs in the border country. My question is -- what jobs???"

Fifth Annual Convention, American GI Forum, Fort Worth, Texas, August 2, 1953?
1954?

"That was the winter of 1950 when the awful freeze hit the rich, citrus-growing Rio Grande Valley. Millions of orange trees were killed. With no crops left to gather, there were no jobs and tens of thousands of "wetbacks" and migrant farm workers were unneeded and unwanted. They were stranded -- no jobs, no money, no food, no shelter..."

"Do you want a baby?" the little girl had asked me that icy morning by the canal ditch I won't soon forget the feeling I had there!"

Don West, "What About Wetbacks?" Southern Farm and Home,
Vol. 115, No. 4, April, 1954.

Howard Whitman, Collier's Magazine, article on migrant farm labor, 1953 or 1954. Uses the phrase, "Heartless harvest."

Toward the end of February, 1954, it appears there was a debate in the House on a resolution which would authorize border recruitment on a unilateral basis by the U.S. -- in other words, "an open border." Rep. Madden (Dem., Indiana), commenting on What Price Wetbacks? declared it was inconceivable that the governor of a great state could tolerate conditions like those depicted...

"Wetbacks parading through U.S. Commissioners Court tell as a story of grafting by petty official in Chihuahua City that forces them to sneak across the border..."

"One wetback, xxx. bitterly told how he had sold his only possession, a horse, to get to Chihuahua from Parral. With his money gone, he said, he had gone to the recruiting center and was told it would cost him 100 pesos to be sent to El Paso. The money from the sale of his horse was gone, he had no work back in Parral. "What could I do?" he asked with a shrug. "I had to eat. I wanted to work for my food. I beat my way to Juarez and came across the river. I had just found my first job when I was arrested."

"Another wetback told his story: "You cannot be recruited if you don't pay. If you pay enough, you can get on the list right away. If you have little, you must wait. How soon you go to work depends upon how many pesos you have. No pesos -- they tell you it will be a year before they reach you. I, too, had to take a chance."

"Wetbacks in court for the first time are given a chance -- a 60-day suspended sentence -- and a fatherly lecture urging them to come back legally or not at all. Repeaters draw sentences in La Tuna Correctional Institution, starting with four months and increasing with each offense..."

"(Many apprehended wetbacks) show the hunger that drew them to the border. The single men have little regret at being jailed. They will be fed and will have a bed at night. The bleak expressions are seen on the faces of those with families they hoped to provide for with a few months work for dollars. And save enough to get on next year's list. The patrol officers who drag them in, who know their problems, sympathize with them far beyond the call of duty. They know most of them to be law-abiding men who ask only for a small part of the four freedoms. But to throw the gates open, in the face of the law, would be anarchy."

"It's harsh -- but it's the law."

El Paso Times, Sept. 30, 1953.

"Wetback Alleges Kicking, Beating by U.S. Officer"

Laredo Times, July 30, 1953

"Tripled Border Force Could Check Aliens,"

Immigration officials said Tuesday they could check the illegal entry of Mexican "wetbacks" into the United States by adding 2,000 more men to the U.S. border patrol in the Southwest. This would just about triple the present 1,089-man patrol..."

San Antonio Evening News, Aug. 19, 1953

Mexico will Help Stop Wetbacks

Washington. Mexican Ambassador Manuel Tello said Wednesday he would be glad to cooperate with Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr., in efforts to stem the influx of Mexican farm laborers illegally entering the United States..."

McAllen Monitor, Aug. 19, 1953

Ike OKs "Wetback" Measures

Denver. President Eisenhower Monday authorized Atty. Gen. Brownell Jr., to use all resources of the federal government to stem the ever increasing tide of "wetbacks" entering this country illegally from Mexico..."

El Paso Times, Aug. 18, 1953

"United States border patrolmen have raided the Hotel del Coronado, along one of California's swanky seaside resorts, and arrested forty Mexican "wetback" employees... They were mostly employed at the hotel as bus boys and dishwashers.

"The noon raid came while the annual convention of the California Growers Association, with 2,000 delegates attending, was in progress."

Dallas Mornin News, Sept. 24, 1953

Laredo Times accused border patrol of shaking down wetbacks (June, 1953), and even had a picture...

A 17 year old wetback interviewed by Idar and McLellan was working ~~as~~ as a killer in a Slaughter house in McAllen City, 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for \$7.00 per week. He was given meals of beans, potatoes, and bread, and was permitted to sleep in the slaughter house. He surrendered to border patrol voluntarily because of conditions of work.

"Experience has shown that in Mexico workers have been medically rejected for the following reasons: 90 percent for physical defects; 8 percent for venereal disease; and 2 percent for pulmonary and mental cases. At the Reception Centers, workers arriving with venereal disease in its initial stage are treated and admitted. Suspected tubercular cases constitute 65 percent of the rejectees; 19 percent for physical defects; 13 percent for advanced venereal disease and 3 percent for mental illness."

letter from Don Larin, Chief, Farm Placement Service, USES

"The blame for a short vegetable crop in the lower Rio Grande Valley Monday was placed on an inadequate labor supply by Austin Anson, manager of the Texas Citrus and Vegetable Grocers and Shippers... "I don't think there's any question but what the Valley would have raised 10 times the vegetable crop if the labor situation were cleared up," Anson said. "And that's what's making prices. The shorter the crop the higher the prices."

Austin American, Dec. 4, 1951

Fort Worth, Tex. Secretary of Labor Maurice J. Tobin appealed to farmers, particularly those along the Mexican border, to cooperate in stopping the traffic of illegal immigration moving north into the United States. The few farmers who employ "wetback" labor sabotage their own industry..the Secretary said in an address before the Farm Labor Conference and the Kiwanis Club here...

"An uncontrolled border is always a danger, an Achilles heel to the security of any country," the Secretary declared. "Not only does it have an adverse effect upon relations with Mexico, but it represents a constant threat to a continuing supply of farm workers from that country when we need them..."

"We know of more than one ranch with miles of frontage on the Mexican border that will not permit our immigration officers to enter and search for aliens. A chain and lock bar the way. Nobody in the U.S. Government knows what is on those ranches."

Labor News Release, USDL, Feb. 18, 1952

"Washington, Feb. 25. Texans opened a last-ditch fight on the House floor Monday against President Truman's demand for powers to search private property for illegal aliens... House Texans claim the provision would be an invasion of the constitutional rights of property owners. They argue that immigration agents should be required to get warrants from a U.S. court... Mr. Truman said the power to search out "wetbacks" is necessary to eliminate "exploitation" of hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants."

Austin Statesman, Feb. 25, 1952